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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 EUR-08 CIAE-00 NSAE-00 DODE-00
PM-03 INR-05 SP-02 NSC-05 OPR-01 EB-04 SAA-01
OMB-01 TRSE-00 ACDA-10 IO-06 HA-02 SSM-01 PA-01
ICA-01 /073 W
----------090508 271139Z /17
P R 270907Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8917
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY NICOSIA

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 4245

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: EAIR, LE, AEMR
SUBJECT: BEIRUT AIRPORT STATUS, MEA CAPACITY IN EVACUATION

1. SITUATION AT BEIRUT AIRPORT REMAINS NORMAL JULY 27. ALTHOUGH HADETH DISTRICT WHERE FIGHTING CONTINUES LIES ADJACENT TO AIRPORT, ONLY A FEW SPENT SMALL-ARMS ROUNDS HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED ON THE FIELD. ONE MORTAR OR SMALL ROCKET ROUND LANDED IN THE BURG AL-BARAJNAH COMMUNITY OF PALESTINIANS IMMEDIATELY NORTH OF THE AIRFIELD, BUT SO FAR THERE HAS BEEN NO RESPONSE THAT WOULD INVOLVE THIS AREA IN THE HADETH FIGHTING. WE HOPE THERE WILL BE NONE, SINCE MOST PROXIMATE THREAT TO THE AIRPORT WOULD BE A SPILL-OVER, INTENTIONAL OR ACCIDENTAL, OF THE HADETH CONFRONTATION INTO THE PALESTINIAN-MUSLIM COMMUNITIES NORTH OF THE RUNWAYS. A SECOND THREAT IS PROSPECT OF CHRISTIAN ARTILLERY FIRE ON AIRPORT IN RETALIATION TO SOME SYRIAN ACTION AGAINST JOUNIEH OR ITS HARBOR.

2. ECONOFF CALLED ON MEA CHAIRMAN ASAD NASR JULY 26
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TO VERIFY AIRPORT CONDITIONS AND MEA'S STANCE IN PRESENT SITUATION. ASAD NASR STATED THAT MEA HAD WORKED OUT GRADUATED PROGRAM FOR PROVIDING MAXIMUM SERVICES TO LEBANESE PUBLIC IF CONDITIONS REACHED AN EMERGENCY. IN ADDITION TO 1500 SEATS/DAY MEA PRESENTLY FLIES OUT OF BEIRUT, MEA KEEPS THREE B-707 AIRCRAFT ON STAND-BY FOR IMMEDIATE RESERVE, SHORT-NOTICE CHARTER SERVICES (SUCH

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AS FLYING PRESIDENT SARKIS TO LATAKIA), AND PILOT
TRAINING. AS FIRST EMERGENCY STEP, THESE THREE WOULD
BE BROUGHT INTO SERVICE. AS SECOND STEP, MEA WOULD
COMBINE PARIS AND LONDON FLIGHTS, FREEING TWO
ADDITIONAL PLANES. THIRD STEP WOULD BE TO COMBINE
ATHENS AND ROME FLIGHTS, FREEING TWO MORE PLANES FOR
TOTAL OF SEVEN OVER NORMAL. TO DECREASE TURN-AROUND
TIME, MEA HAS PLANNED FOR RAPID SHUTTLE TO NEAREST
AIRPORTS: CYPRUS, AMMAN, AND ATHENS. IF DEMAND
EXCEEDED EVEN FOREGOING CAPACITY, MEA COULD ASSIGN ITS
B-747 JUMBO, WITH 400 SEATS, TO EVACUATION SHUTTLE.
ASAD NASR LEFT NO DOUBTS THAT MEA IS PREPARED TO
EXPAND SERVICE THROUGH EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES IF A
CRISIS DEVELOPS.

3. SPECIFICALLY RE EMBASSY NEEDS, ASAD NASR NOTED
THAT MEA HAS SERVED USG BEFORE. HE PROMISED TO MEET
ANY POTENTIAL USG CHARTER REQUIREMENTS ON SHORT NOTICE,
IF NECESSARY WITH JUMBO. TO DO SO, MEA WILL REQUIRE
A LETTER OF GUARANTEE (SUCH AS USG EXTENDED TO MEA
DURING 1970 EVACUATION OF AMMAN) IN ORDER THAT SPECIFIC
AIRCRAFT CHARTERED BE INSURED FOR THE FLIGHT. WE ARE
TRANSMITTING SEPTEL TEXT OF 1970 LETTER WITH REQUEST
FOR CONTINGENCY AUTHORIZATION TO REISSUE IT SHOULD NEED
ARISE.

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4. COMMERCIAL RESERVATIONS OUTLOOK: WHILE MOST FLIGHTS
FROM BEIRUT, INCLUDING MEA'S, ARE FULLY BOOKED ONE WEEK
IN ADVANCE, NO-SHOWS ARE LEGION. MEA'S PLANES ARE
DEPARTING HALF EMPTY.THIS WILL CHANGE ONCE EMBASSY
ADVISORY IS PUBLISHED, BUT WE EXPECT SEATS WILL CONTINUE
TO BE AVAILABLE TO STAND-BY PASSENGERS ON MOST FLIGHTS.
AIR TRAFFIC IS MOVING NORMALLY AS OF JULY 27.

5. COMMENT: APPROXIMATELY 2,000 AIRLINE SEATS IN ADDITION
TO MEA'S 1500 ARE COMMERCIALLY AVAILABLE OUT OF BEIRUT EVERY
DAY. RESIDENT AMERICAN EXPATRIATE COMMUNITY NUMBERS FEWER
THAN 300 AND TOTAL AMCIT ROLLS SHOW 3824, MANY OF WHOM WILL
NOT WISH EVACUATION. WE BELIEVE NEED FOR A USG-CHARTERED
AIRCRAFT IS REMOTE. NEVERTHELESS, WE WISH PREPARE FOR THIS
CONTINGENCY AMONG THE REST.
PARKER

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NNN

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